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AUTHOR Koltai, Leslie
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of general education in the community colleges in the United States and presents recommendations for changes to improve the quality of education in the community colleges. First, the paper notes the lack of stature, relevance, and institutional support for general education in the community colleges and argues that if change is to occur general education must be defined, and its content and goals determined. Next, results of a study conducted to examine the meaning and relevance of the associate degree in the community colleges are outlined, including the need for more general education course work and updated competencies in general education; lower student demand for the associate in arts degree; the need for continued reviews in the area of high technology courses and programs; and the perceived need for more basic skills education in the community colleges. Then, college graduates' views, derived from the Comprehensive Outcome Measures Project, of the skills having the greatest value in the "real world" are specified, including skills in communication, problem solving, value clarification, functioning within various social settings, using science and technology, and using the arts. Finally, recommendations for improving general education within the community colleges are presented including the development of appropriate competency standards to guarantee quality; better liaison between the community colleges and four-year institutions; improved student counseling and career planning; the establishment of associate degree committees at each college; and efforts to attract the support of foundations for using community colleges as a national resource in advancing the world of work and developing cooperative efforts between universities, colleges, and high schools. (HB)

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SEARCH FOR GENERAL EDUCATION:
A CHALLENGE FOR THE NATION'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Dr. Leslie Koltai
Chancellor
Los Angeles Community College District

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Mid-Career Fellowship Program
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SEARCH FOR GENERAL EDUCATION:

A CHALLENGE FOR THE NATION'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Thank you, _____. In my remarks today, I was asked to speak about the search for general education in our nation's community colleges -- which implies, of course, that general education is somehow missing. I submit to you that general education is indeed missing -- missing relevance, missing stature, and missing much-needed institutional support.

Americans have long debated and discussed the issue of general education to determine exactly what constitutes exposure to the intellectual, philosophical, aesthetic and practical concepts of our society and the greater world in which we live and work.

For example, in 1818, Thomas Jefferson set goals for our national educational system -- goals which are, I believe, consistent with the goals of general education programs today:

* to give all citizens the information that they need for the transaction of their own business,
* to enable them to calculate for themselves, and to express and preserve their ideas in writing,
* to improve, by reading, their morals and faculties,
* to understand their duties to their neighbors and country, and to discharge with confidence the function confided to them by either,
* to know their rights, to exercise with order and justice those they retain,
* and, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which they shall be placed.

I would add that we also should help each individual to see other cultures with appreciation and tolerance, to recognize that they are not less worthy just because they are different.

In terms of the on-going discussion and debate about this issue, however, Harvard educator Patricia Cross has observed that reform movements for general education seem to appear just about every 30 years -- and some think that they arise in response to cyclical tensions in society that are seen as threatening disintegration and isolation.

She notes that three periods of general education reform in this century have each appeared when society, in the larger sense, was undergoing upheaval. For example, the first occurred around 1920 and culminated with Robert Hutchins' "great books" curriculum at the University of Chicago. The second, which followed World War II, was epitomized by the call for reform of the President's Commission on Higher Education in 1948. And today there are numerous commissions and reports calling for a "return to excellence" in education.

Today's observers stress the need for reform that is more all-inclusive, involving a broader perspective of which institutions should be involved. There is widespread thought that high schools should join community colleges and four-year institutions in any such efforts -- which is an approach that has too seldom been followed in the past.

An article, "Ties That Do Not Bind" in Change magazine (1982), pointed out that "even the highly publicized core curriculum at Harvard College, developed over 5-1/2 years, might as well have been fashioned in a vacuum so far as the secondary schools were concerned," since Harvard "never bothered asking superintendents or principals of feeder schools what they thought of the proposed changes -- and what impact they would have on their curricula." (Maeroff)

And, as Ernie Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has pointed out, "Much of the curriculum confusion in high schools has occurred because higher education has seemed so confused over the definition of an educated person." For example, when colleges and universities relaxed the course requirements for admissions, they paved the way for less stringent high school requirements.

In community colleges, the general education situation has been the reflection of a variety of influences.

According to Cohen and Brawer, in their book, The American Community College, it has fallen victim to "faculty power, lack of student interest, increased demands on faculty time, difficulty in integrating disciplines, and, most of all, from its lack of demonstrated value and the superficiality of the presentations."

They say there has also been a loss of proprietorship among faculty and counselors, a generally lethargic approach to curricular revitalization, widely divergent articulation agreements, and the absence of structured, sequential course requirements.

And, too often, community colleges have followed the prescription for failure in curriculum change -- which is, "We can't do anything until everyone agrees."

There is another component to reform in general education, as well -- a component that has been neglected -- the student.

Jerry Gaff has written that one of the more curious aspects of general education reform is that the debate usually concerns curricular philosophy, structures and subject matter -- "with little or no attention given to students." And yet students are taking fewer and fewer courses -- and having less and less interaction with faculty and counselors. They need human contact; they need advisement; they need counseling. These needs are too often ignored.

And yet the issue of general and liberal education is too important to be handled in a less-than-comprehensive manner.

As Joseph Duffey, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, has said, this area of the curriculum is "not the sacred province of a select few, (but, instead) is the intellectual and spiritual resource by which a society as a whole perceives and gives shape to its cultural life and legacy."

And, he observed that "no set of institutions is better placed than our community colleges to insure public access to these resources -- resources that are the rightful heritage of all our citizens."

However, there seems to be resistance to change and to reform in terms of the general education curriculum, as noted by James O. Hammons of the University of Arkansas, who said, "General education, like progress, is generally viewed with favor, but its predecessor -- change -- is viewed with fear and suspicion. In order for change to occur, the dead weight of inertia must be ovecome. General education will need to be defined and sold, its content and goals determined.

"In addition," he said, "faculty will have to be trained; student support enlisted; curriculum changes approved; materials of instruction developed or purchased; organizational structures re-examined; compromises worked out on numbers of hours to be devoted; articulation agreements with four-year colleges developed, and so on."

Hammons said that, while the task is not easy, "it must be undertaken if the community colleges are to prepare students with the education they need for survival today ... Earlier in its history," he said, "the community had an opportunity and missed it ... For the community college, 'next time' has arrived."

Following me on this program is Donald Schmeltekopf, whose interest in -- and commitment to -- general education and the humanities in community colleges has been continuous and well-defined.

In the Community College Humanist, he once wrote that, "Most educators would probably agree that the humanities constitute a fundamental component of the intellectual development of students. Yet no other area in higher education, especially in the community college, has a more doubtful position."

He wrote that, "Compared to the sciences, social sciences, mathematics, various technologies and career programs, the humanities are typically something of an afterthought ... whether in the minds of students, professional colleagues, or the public."

"It is not news," he observed, "that the humanities have been, are are, in a protracted retreat."

A year and a half ago, I was asked by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges to chair a taskforce to study the meaning and relevance of the associate degree in our technologically-oriented society. Funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

That study, which resulted in a report distributed by AACJC, incorporated viewpoints solicited from one hundred community, junior and technical college districts with a total enrollment of approximately two million students. In addition, one hundred high schools and fifty Fortune 500 companies were surveyed, as well as academic and professional associations, and university professors in the field of community college education.

Also, a special effort was made to contact the state higher education officers across the country, and there was a thorough study of the literature.

The study concluded that community colleges are ideally placed -- both literally and philosophically -- to assure access to general education. And yet our offerings in this area are too often fragmented, with watered down standards and little coherence or rationale for their existence.

For example, we were told by John Roueche, Director of the Program in Community College Education at the University of Texas at Austin, that the quality of community college general education programs offers cause for great concern. Basing his remarks on the results of two national studies recently completed by his office, Dr. Roueche said that two-year colleges have lost the qualitative aspects of offerings in this area.

Citing results that indicate a lack of reading and writing assignments in degree-oriented humanities and general education programs, he said that "students do more reading and writing -- and at higher quality levels -- in technical programs." Dr. Roueche was not alone in this observation.

As you can see in Table 1, among the community college administrators responding to our surveys, more than half indicated that they see serious problems with the general education component of the associate degree. They indicated that students now have too many choices in terms of meeting general education unit requirements. They called for more general education course work, as well as more rigor and greater educational integrity. And they agreed that there is a tremendous need for more specific, updated competencies in this area.

They also said that the tremendous student heterogeneity found in most classrooms is at least partially to blame for lowered standards and less-than-effective teaching. Many community college faculty members face students with such vast differences in reading and writing levels that it makes coherent, organized instruction difficult, if not impossible. In fact, it's not unusual to have students reading at eight or more different grade levels within a single classroom. Obviously, instructors find it difficult to make their courses attractive -- or even comprehensible -- to students who are not adequately prepared to deal with the subject matter.

I also found that the number of associate in arts degrees awarded by responding colleges dropped by more than 7 percent in the past few years, while there has been an increase in student demand for all other degrees, including the associate in science, associate in applied science, and associate in occupational studies -- degrees for which there are lower general education unit requirements than for the associate in arts.

For example, while the mean number of units required by responding colleges in the major subject area for the associate in arts was 21, 24 units in the major were required for the associate in science and 32 for the associate in applied science -- which means less flexibility and less opportunity for students to take general education courses while meeting the requirements for their chosen degree.

When asked how they would change the associate degree unit configurations, the community college respondents gave us suggestions shown in Table 2. They said they would increase associate in arts behavioral science requirements by an average of 4 units, and communications by 5 units. For the associate in science, they would increase behavioral science by 4 units, communications by 3, and the humanities by 6 units.

As shown in Table 3, the colleges indicated suggested priorities in degree competencies. These priorities are contrasted with those of the business respondents - showing agreement on the importance of acquiring and actualizing knowledge, for example.

It is also interesting to note that honors programs, which are usually thought to be an indicator by which to measure the quality of educational offerings, are only offered by 28 percent of the responding colleges, as shown in Table 4.

And the colleges observed that many changes have been brought about by high technology, in terms of curriculum planning and equipment purchases. These observations, indicated in Table 5, demonstrated the tremendous influence of high technology -- and the need for continued reviewe in this area.

Some community college respondents also noted that the current lack of emphasis on general education may be the indirect result of community colleges' tremendous success in providing quality vocational education, which has perhaps influenced governmental funding agencies to consider two-year colleges as institutions for job training, but not for other aspects of higher education.

And yet the businesses responding to my inquiries stressed the need for greater emphasis on general education in two-year colleges. As shown in Table 6, they indicated that they believe there should be more emphasis on the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and oral and written communication, as well as on problem solving and getting along with other people.

This viewpoint is perhaps best expressed by Charles Bowen, IBM's program director for educational development, who is very clear about what his company is looking for in prospective employees. "The main thing we want is the ability to understand and solve problems," he said, adding that this has resulted in placing greater emphasis on "a broader interdisciplinary education in the people IBM hires."

This attitude is by no means unique. Over and over again, it was emphasized that the business community needs workers who can read, write, compute and think clearly -- "that it can get the job done only with employees who get to work on time, cooperate with each other, take responsibility and adapt to change. If employees cannot function at this minimal level, their technical skills are unimportant to business and industry.

The business community recognizes that an individual must be able to take bits and pieces of specialized knowledge and blend them into a context that has wider applicability and broader meaning. It asks that prospective employees know how to use the knowledge they acquire. And, as we know, it is general education that encourages and strengthens the relationship -- the inter-relatedness -- of knowledge and competencies.

Whereas at one time, disciplines such as English, mathematics, economics, psychology and the sciences would most certainly not have been regarded as vocational subjects, today selected content from these disciplines is essential to the occupational competence of the majority of the work force.

As Naisbitt says in Megatrends, there is little room in the economy of today and tomorrow for occupational specialists, who can too quickly and easily find themselves obsolete. Instead, he says, we are moving toward greater appreciation of -- and demand for -- the "generalist who can adapt" to the ever-fluctuating roles society and technology are demanding that we play. We saw this to be true among the businesses we surveyed.

I also found that state higher education officers felt strongly that general education should not be ignored at the community college level -- even among those seeking vocational training. For example, Norma Foreman Glascow, Commissioner of the Connecticut Board of Higher Education, told us that emphasis on skill training without general education competencies can only assure "early obsolescence of skills and inability to retrain and learn new skills."

She said that "infusion of a liberal arts or general education component for the degree is of particular importance, to assure achievement of competencies in reading, writing, communications skills, mathematical concepts, and analytical skills."

Donald Nolan, Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education for the State of New York, told me that, in his state, there are precise specifications as to the minimum amount of liberal/general education units required for earned associate degrees. These criteria apply whether the degree is in a technical or pre-baccalaureate area.

In Kansas, the general education component is the basis of distinction between various associate degrees -- and general education is required for all. For example, 45 hours of general education are required for the associate in arts, 30 hours for the associate in science, and 15 hours for the associate in applied science.

In Massachusetts, general and liberal education are seen as so intrinsic to collegiate work that the state's Long-Range Plan urges that degrees be built upon a base of strong offerings in these areas, according to John Duff, Chancellor of the Massachusetts Board of Regents of Higher Education.

Based upon the responses I received, it became clear that there is the least confusion as to general education degree requirements in states in which there are well-defined articulation agreements --agreements in which satisfaction of associate degree criteria also signifies completion of lower division requirements for those transferring to four-year institutions.

For example, in Florida, the general education requirement of the associate degree is seen as successful completion of a strong general education program and enables the student to transfer without need for additional coursework in this area, since the associate degree's general education component is seen as comprehensive and well-defined.

This general education articulation agreement constitutes a major building block in the state's system of higher education, according to James Wattenbarger, Director of the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Florida.

General education was a topic addressed by nearly every state higher education official responding to the survey.

As shown in Table 7, high school principals and counselors also expressed concern about the strength and integrity of community college general education offerings and requirements, with nearly half (47 percent) recommending an increase in general education unit requirements at two-year colleges. (Eleven percent recommended a decrease, 42 percent saw no need for change.)

The concern at all levels is that we are producing graduates who are well-trained instead of well-educated, and who are therefore ill-prepared to accommodate and adapt to changes within their own specialties, let alone to changes in the world at large.

And there is widespread apprehension among all sectors that the "technicians of the future" will be easy victims of over-specialization -- that their narrowly defined skills and outlooks will make them early candidates for obsolescence.

There is also concern that, in our eagerness to respond to students' demand for free choice and random movement throughout the curriculum, we have allowed educational continuity and sequential learning to suffer --that we have lost the strength of knowledge that is built upon other knowledge.

Ironically, this trend runs counter to that of vocational and technical programs, which usually call for quite specific sequences of courses, as well as measured student progress through the curriculum.

How did we get into this situation?

It's no secret that the social context of a country influences and shapes its educational institutions. And, during the past decade, society has increasingly demanded that schools and colleges make individuals more useful and more productive --that is, more employable. Career preparation has become a particularly high priority of this country's taxpayers, who demand "measurable" results for their investment. Funding mechanisms have reflected this point of view.

In addition, students have become more pragmatic and often choose courses they believe will have a positive impact on their eventual earning power. These student priorities have been reflected in enrollment patterns, which affected staffing and scheduling decisions.

And, as undergraduate requirements in many technical and professional fields have become more and more stringent, a greater proportion of the curriculum has been devoted to required coursework in these fields. The result, then, has been the significant strengthening of technical and professional programs --but often at the expense of general and liberal education.

I believe that people still want to be educated, but only if within that educational process we prepare them for a career. This calls for a balance between professional/technical and general education -- one that provides a format in which the general education can once again be appreciated as useful.

Naisbitt, in his book Megatrends, said that we can tell we are being educated when our options are increasing. It is the responsibility of educators to demonstrate to our students that educational programs that are too specific, and that lack breadth and depth, do a very limited job of increasing one's options. We must convince our students of the value of open-ended opportunities in today's highly dynamic world, and we must show them that these opportunities are often overlooked when single-mindedly pursuing blind alleys to employment.

In terms of community college curriculum, there is increased sentiment in favor of developing a cluster or "job-family" approach to career and technical education, with curricula planned for clusters of occupations with a common theoretical core, rather than specialized on highly specific

occupations. By incorporating more general education into such programs, graduates would be "field-oriented" rather than "job-oriented," and thus likely to experience greater professional mobility throughout their working life.

It is exactly this kind of flexibility and adaptability that business and industry want.

It is not only employers who wish that graduates had more background in communication and interpersonal skills. A survey of graduates themselves, from all types of programs several years out of college, found that the majority wished that they had had more preparation in English, psychology, and ways of understanding interpersonal relationships. Using 20/20 hindsight, the graduates suggested that breadth be provided in those areas, no matter what program a student might be pursuing.

And a study funded by the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and American College Testing Service recently focused on identifying the areas of undergraduate learning found to have the greatest applicability to adult situations -- both personal and professional -- after graduation.

That study, called the Comprehensive Outcome Measures Project, or COMP, found that the areas identified by college graduates as having the greatest value in the "real world" are --in order of importance --skills in communication, problem solving, value clarification, functioning within various social settings, using science and technology, and using the arts.

It may be comforting to note that the debate about the relative importance of general versus career education is not new:

Aristotle said, "Should the useful in life, or should virtue, or should the higher knowledge be the aim of our training? ...no one knows on what principle we should proceed."

In today's technologically-based world, however, the questions and the implications are broader and deeper. There are dangers inherent in a curriculum that is too heavily career-oriented.

I'm sure Chancellor Greenfield will refer to this issue in his remarks in greater detail.

As Frederick Rudolph noted in his book, Curriculum, career education often promises students technical skills and "positive" attitudes toward work -- but, by itself, neglects the educational experiences that help to make them "good, interesting, and wise men and women."

And, in his book Work, Learning and the American Future, James O'Toole warns against "specialization of vocational training in the mistaken belief that it will make a young person more employable. Too often," he says, "the result is individuals who not only cannot claim to be broadly or liberally educated -- they can barely read, write or compute."

"The new vocationalism simply narrows the focus of education and, in doing so, eliminates too many options for our students," says O'Toole, who calls this preoccupation with vocationalism "inappropriate to the task of preparing young people for a changing and uncertain future."

Balance is what O'Toole is calling for. And this reflects the fact that, for many, community colleges represent what Patricia Cross calls a blended life plan -- with concurrent (rather than consecutive) work, education and leisure.

And they usually need an integrated educational approach, as well, combining practical knowledge, academic education, and -- for some -- career-oriented skills.

She says that "the goal of today's reformers of general education is not to promote a singular new or improved model of general education -- but to gain heightened recognition for and action toward the ideal of integration, coherence, and shared values and concerns in the college curriculum."

And yet, in the past decade, vocational education went from one-third of the community college curriculum to its present two-thirds.

This is unfortunate because, without a general education and/or liberal education component, occupational education involves a higher risk for the student -- in other words, occupational education is almost entirely wasted if there is no job waiting at the end of the training period. But general/liberal education offers more options and thus, more career opportunities.

It is in this light that Cohen and Brawer call for making community college education "sufficiently broad so that the skills learned are applicable to a variety of occupations" and they recommend doing this by integrating broader subject matter into career preparation courses.

To address these issues, I made a number of recommendations as part of the associate degree study to which I referred earlier--recommendations which are now being considered by AACJC and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. While not all applied to the issue of general education, I believe that the following selected recommendations would create the context in which general education reform can take place:

Since it is clear that neither general education nor technical coursework can be relevant or valuable to the student if it is outside the realm of his or her abilities, I recommended development of appropriate competency standards to guarantee quality. This is a basis upon which all other improvements can be built.

And, since the quality of the degree depends, more than anything else, upon the excellence of the faculty, I recommended that a new liaison be established with universities to improve the quality of our existing teaching corps, and to develop teacher training programs to suitably equip those instructors who will be coming to community colleges in the future.

Colleges must also move from a climate of student self-advisement to a carefully planned and executed counseling process, with the emphasis placed on successful transition to the workplace or a four-year institution.

I suggested that counseling and advisement be enhanced with the appropriate technology, including use of computer programs providing information on opportunities and requirements within specific employment categories.

I also recommended the establishment of associate degree committees at each college to work with faculty, students, and four-year institutions, as well as business, industry, and labor groups. Activities could focus on such issues as counseling, orientation, matriculation, and collaborative efforts.

I also recommended efforts to attract the support of national and local foundations for studies and projects in two specific areas: first, the use of community, junior, and technical colleges as a national resource in advancing the world of work and the world of on-going education; and second, in the development of cooperative efforts between the university, community colleges, and high schools to serve a given geographical area.

Continued attention and emphasis are crucial, because the revitalization of general education will only be accomplished if bold steps are taken to achieve necessary change.

Our best efforts are needed for, as it was recently stated in Industry Week magazine, "The one national resource without which all of the others become meaningless is the talented, competitive, questing human beings who enable civilization to achieve magnificent progress."

America's community, junior, and technical colleges are dedicated to helping all the members of our communities become just this kind of individuals -- and society is now calling upon us to continue in this path with even greater effectiveness.

It is a challenge we cannot ignore.

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